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The GREAT SWAMP
FIGHT
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A Paper

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GREAT SWAMP FIGHT

“Of all the single incidents,” says John Fiske, “in what is known as King Philip’s War, the most bloody and disastrous to the forces, and in the numbers engaged on each side, and most important in its results, is what has been designated as the Great Swamp Fight.”

King Philip’s War, as such, commenced by the attack of the Indians upon the inhabitants of Swanzey, Massachusetts, on the 24th of June, 1675, which was followed by attacks upon the towns of Dartmouth, Taunton and Middleborough. On the 15th of July of the same year, the Commissioners of Massachusetts and Connecticut, attended by a strong military force, were sent to the Narragansetts to obtain new guarantees of friendship. They succeeded in negotiating a treaty by which the Chiefs of that powerful tribe agreed, for a stipulated price, to deliver to the English, living or dead, whatever subjects of Philip should come within their country, and to resist any invasion by Philip of their own lands or those of the English, and gave hostages for their fulfillment of these engagements. The Indian War continued, and you are familiar with the attacks upon Brookfield and the Connecticut River towns of Hadley, Hatfield and Deerfield.

In September, the Commissioners of the United Colonies, Massachusetts, Plymouth and Connecticut, which formed the Confederacy, met at Boston, and decided to raise a thousand men for a defensive war ; that of this force Massachusetts was to furnish 527, Connecticut 315, and Plymouth 158. In October, the attitude of the formidable Narragansetts was regarded with anxiety, as it was known that so far from keeping their compact made in July, they had harbored many of Philip's dispersed allies. Canonchet and other Chiefs came to Boston while the Commissioners were in session, and promised that the hostile Indians, whom they admitted were under their protection, should be surrendered within ten days. The time arrived, but no Indians appeared. The Commissioners became alarmed: if the strongest and most numerous of the New England Tribes, the Narragansetts, were to prove faithless and should commence active hostilities, great, indeed, would be the peril of the Colonists. The fifth day after the breach of the treaty, the Commissioners reassembled, and determined that, besides the number of soldiers formerly agreed upon to be raised, one thousand more should be provided and forwarded for service in the Narragansett country. Governor Winslow was appointed Chief, and the Colony of Connecticut was to furnish the second in command. Major Robert Treat was subsequently chosen for this place. The Commander was to put himself at the head of his forces within six weeks, and in the meantime "a solemn day of humiliation and prayer" was kept throughout the Confederacy.

In giving the notice of their action to the several General Courts or Colonies, the Commissioners commended "that care be taken that the soldiers sent on the expedition be men of

courage, strength and activity, their arms well fixed and fit for service; that their clothing be in all respects strong and warm, suitable for the season; that they have provisions in their knapsacks for a week's march from their rendezvous; and also that there be a meet number of ministers and chirurgeons provided and appointed for the expedition."

The Narragansetts were given time to make their peace by performing their covenants with the Commissioners, and also for making reparations for all damages sustained by their neglect; but they made no attempt to fulfill the provisions of their treaty, emboldened, partly, as Palfrey thinks, by the successes of the Indians on the Connecticut River, and also, as Mather says in his Brief History, "that in the Spring when having the leaves of the trees and swamps to be-friend them, they could destroy the English;" and there is little reason to doubt but that in this conclusion they were largely influenced by Philip and his emissaries.

Early in December, the Colonial troops commenced to gather. There were six companies from Massachusetts, under the command of Major Appleton and Captains Moseley, Gardner, Davenport, Oliver and Johnson; from Connecticut, five companies, under Major Treat and Captains Seeley, Gallup, Mason, Watts and Marshall; two companies from Plymouth, under Major Bradford and Captain Gorham. Captain Benjamin Church was invited by Governor Winslow to command a company: he declined taking a commission, but promised to accompany the expedition as a volunteer. Attached to the levy from Connecticut were some Mohegan Indians; but they did not render any substantial aid in the fight which followed.

On the 12th of December, most of the army arrived at Mr. Smith's, in Wickford, the place intended for their headquarters. "Captain Moseley on his way thither," says Hubbard, "had happily surprised thirty Indians, one of whom he took along with him as a guide, Peter by name, who, under some disgust with his countrymen, or his Sachem, which made him prove the more real friend to our forces, wherein he faithfully performed what he promised ; and without his assistance our men would have been much at a loss to have found the enemy until it had been too late to have fought them." Hubbard, later in his narrative, mentions the services of this Peter as the first of the remarkable circumstances in the victory which ensued ; and Mather and other historians give him due credit for his aid. One writer has said : " No Englishman was acquainted with the situation of the fort and but for their pilot, Peter, there is very little probability they would have found it, much less have effected anything against it."

On the 15th, Bull's Garrison House, in South Kingstown, at what is now known as Tower Hill, intended for a place of shelter, had been attacked by the Indians and demolished. At Pettaquamscutt, where shelter was also expected, it was found that the Indians had destroyed the buildings and butchered the inhabitants.

Some of the troops were a little late, but on the 18th the various forces were united and the whole army encamped in the open air, the weather being cold and snowy. The next day, upon setting out, Captains Moseley and Davenport led the van; Major Appleton and Captain Oliver followed; General Winslow and the Plymouth forces held the centre; and the Connecticut

contingent brought up the rear. Captain Oliver in his account says: "In the morning, Dec. 19th, Lord's Day, at five o'clock, we marched; snow two or three feet deep and withal an extreme hard frost so that some of our men were frozen in their hands and feet and thereby disabled from service." Cotton Mather says in his work: "The whole army marched away through cold and snow and very amazing difficulties enough to have damned any ordinary fortitude." The cold, severe as it was upon the men, proved, however, of this advantage: that it froze the surroundings of the fort and made its capture more feasible.

The stronghold of the Narragansetts, fifteen miles away, was reached at one o'clock. This fort which the Indians had fortified to the best of their ability, was on a solid piece of upland, encompassed by a swamp. In it were gathered according to the best authorities, about thirty-five hundred Indians. On the inner side of this natural defence they had driven rows of palisades, encircled about with a hedge nearly a rod in thickness; and the only entrance to the enclosure was by a fallen tree or log; four or five feet from the ground, "this bridge being protected by a block house right over against it, from which," says Hubbard, "they sorely galled our men that first went in."

that
In spite of the fact the English were wearied by their long march through the snow, scarcely halting to refresh themselves with food, immediately upon arriving they commenced the onset. The Colonists had been so long in making their preparations that the Indians were well apprised of their approach and had made the best arrangements in their power to withstand them. The beginning was most disastrous to the officers. Captain Johnson, of Roxbury, was shot dead on the bridge as he was rushing over

at the head of his company. Captain Davenport, of Boston, had succeeded in penetrating within the enclosure when he met the same fate. Captain Gardner, of Salem, and two of the Connecticut Captains, Gallup, of New London, and Marshall, of Windsor, were also killed outright, while Lieutenant Upham, of Boston, and Captain Seeley, of Stratford, received wounds which afterwards proved fatal. Major Bradford, of Plymouth, was sorely wounded, as well as Captain John Mason, of Norwich, and Captain Benjamin Church.

Notwithstanding the fall of their leaders, the rank and file pressed on, and although the entrance was choked by the bodies of the slain yet, over the mangled corpses of their comrades, the assailants climbed the logs and breastworks in their efforts to penetrate the fort. Once they were beaten out, but they soon rallied and regained their ground. The conflict raged with varying success for nearly three hours. "The struggle," says Arnold, "on either side was one for life;" "Whichever party," he adds, "should triumph, there was no hope for the vanquished; Christian and savage fought alike with the fury of fiends, and the sanctity of the New England Sabbath was broken by the yells of the savages, the roar of musketry, the clash of steel and all the demoniac passions which make a battle ground an earthly hell." The carnage was fearful; the result was yet doubtful; until an entrance to the fort was effected in the rear by the reserve guard of the Connecticut troops. "The Indians, who were all engaged at the first point of attack, were surprised and confused by a heavy fire behind them; their powder was nearly consumed; but their arrows continued to rain a deadly shower upon the charging foe. The wigwams were set on fire within

the fort, contrary to the earnest entreaty of Captain Church, who, with his knowledge of military matters and the condition of the assailants, realized the importance of shelter and food to the exhausted conquerors." He says in his narrative that "he begged them to forbear and spare the wigwams in the fort from fire," for, he adds, "they were all lined with baskets and tubbs of grain and other provisions sufficient to supply the whole army until Spring, and every wounded man might have a good warm house to lodge in, which otherways would necessarily perish with the storm and cold, and, moreover, that the army had no other provisions to trust unto or depend upon ; that he knew the Plymouth forces had not so much as a biscake left, for he had seen their last dealt out." "Humanity and policy alike," continues Arnold, "sustained the advice of the gallant Church, but it was too late. The infuriated Colonists had already commenced the work of destruction ; in a few minutes the frail material of five hundred Indian dwellings furnished the funeral pyre of the wounded and dying ; the blazing homes of the Narragansetts lighted their path to death."

More than a thousand of the enemy perished. The English lost, in killed and wounded, according to Hubbard, over two hundred ; and other accounts place the numbers still higher. A large proportion of these might have been saved if the advice of Church had been followed. When night fell there was no shelter or provisions for the conquerors or conquered. The Indians escaped to an open cedar swamp in the neighborhood, where many perished for want of food or covering. "The fate of the English," says Rhode Island's historian, "was no better. They had taken a weary march of fifteen miles since daybreak,

without halting for food, and had spent the remainder of the day in desperate combat. They had now to retrace their steps in the dark, through a dense forest, with a deep snow beneath their feet and a December storm howling about their heads. By the glare of the burning wigwams they formed their line of march back to Wickford, bearing with them their dead and wounded," a march, says Cotton Mather, "made through hardships than an whole age could not parallel." It was two o'clock before they reached the camping ground. The cold was severe ; many died on the way ; the limbs of the wounded were stiffened ; and fatigue had disabled most of the remainder. There was no shelter or provisions of any sort, and when morning dawned it was found that death had done a melancholy work. The heavy storm during the night had wrapped many a brave soldier in his winding sheet, and the depth of the new fallen snow made it difficult for the survivors, in their weak condition, even to move. Captain Church truthfully says in his narrative : "Having burned up all the houses and provisions in the fort, the army returned the same night in the storm and cold, and I suppose that every one that is acquainted with that night most deeply laments the miseries that attended them, especially the wounded and dying men. But it mercifully came to pass that Captain Andrew Belcher arrived at Mr. Smith's from Boston with a vessel laden with provisions for the army, who must otherwise have perished for want."

After the Great Swamp Fight the sick and wounded were carried to the Island of Rhode Island, where they were cared for by the people of Portsmouth and Newport.

The propriety of a winter campaign on the part of the

Colonists might be questioned ; but, by delay, opportunity would have been given to the Indians to make greater preparations, and this was to be considered. Cotton Mather, who saw the Providence of God in every undertaking, says : “ Had the assault been deferred one day longer, there fell such a storm of snow that for divers weeks it must have been impracticable, and at the end of those weeks there came so violent and unusual a thaw as to have made the way to the fort impassable. “ Just now,” he says, “ was the time for the work, and the work was accomplished.”

This virtually ended the expedition and the “ Great Swamp Fight,” most memorable in New England History and the annals of the early Colonists. The power of the Narragansetts was irretrievably broken ; the survivors returned the next day to their smouldering and ruined fort, and found some provisions to ameliorate their starving condition. It was fortunate that the Indians had been too dazed by their defeat to pursue their retreating foes or the remnant of the English army would have been destroyed ; and this course, says Mather, had been advised by some of the leaders of the Narragansetts.

Although fought upon her own soil and a great sufferer, yet Rhode Island, as such, took no part in the expedition. The enterprise was undertaken by the so-called Confederacy, of which Rhode Island was not a member. The religious freedom of that Colony caused her to be regarded with suspicion by the other governments, and she was left out of their union. Neither was the consent of Rhode Island asked to invade her territory for the purpose in hand, which was a violation of her Charter and a disregard of the rights of a sister Colony. The

Commissioners of the Confederacy averred that the Narragansetts had proved treacherous, but the General Assembly of Rhode Island believed the war unnecessary. In a letter to the Connecticut authorities the following year, they claimed "that the Narragansetts were subjects of His Majesty the King, and put under the government of Rhode Island, and that there had been no manifestation of war against us from them till by the United Colonies they were forced to war or to such submission as it seems they could not subject themselves to, thereby involving us in such hazards, charges and losses which have fallen upon us in our plantations that no Colony has received the like, considering our numbers and people." But notwithstanding this assertion on the part of the General Assembly, it can hardly be conceived that the Narragansetts would have remained quiet under the circumstances, stirred up, as they were, by the machinations and persuasions of King Philip; and if they had not been subdued at this time still greater must have been the sufferings of Rhode Island.

In view of the murders and depredations which had been committed, it is quite probable that many recruits from Rhode Island joined in the expedition; but as they did not go as an organized force, it is impossible to ascertain the exact numbers.

After their disastrous defeat, we hear of but little more of the Narragansetts. The remainder submitted the following year, and gradually diminishing in numbers, they never again became formidable as a race, or offered any organized resistance to the Colonists.

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